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THE MUSICAL QUARTERLY

VOL. VIII

JULY, 1922

NO. 3

THE AMERICAN COMPOSER : THE VICTIM OF HIS FRIENDS

By JOHN TASKER HOWARD

ENCOURAGEMENT of the American composer is to-day a most widely discussed topic. Societies are formed for a proper hearing of his music, festivals are arranged with American programs, singers invariably have an "American Group" at their recitals, and the advance bulletins of orchestral seasons announce a number of native works. Such movements mark the inevitable reaction from the all too recent foreign domination of our musical life.

Our young nation was compelled to import foreign musicians and teachers, and it was but natural that these musicians and teachers should have brought with them the traditions and musical literature of the Old World. Young politically and economically, America was young in culture also. Consequently, even as we grew older, it was difficult, in some cases impossible, for native art to secure recognition. The public demanded the foreign label; a demand by no means confined to art-products. Importers of commercial wares have always thrived on the magic of a Paris or London trade-mark.

Although snobbishness toward American music dare not openly speak its mind to-day, we know that it still exists. To some critics and music-lovers America spells immaturity and mediocrity. Approbation is too often accompanied by a patronizing condescension that irritates both the composer and his rapidly increasing number of friends.

These friends of the American composer have valiantly fought the hostile attitude, and during the World War the reaction had its culmination. At that time recognition of native

art became a question of patriotism, but while much has been accomplished in the right direction, we have not yet arrived at the point where the American composer always secures the proper kind of hearing. We sometimes overwork our enthusiasm in his behalf, and our efforts to help him may prove a boomerang.

The propaganda activities of the War period gave the American enthusiasts their cue, for well organized publicity campaigns had brought astonishingly successful results. These campaigns served their purpose in selling Liberty Bonds, and they raised funds for the Red Cross and other War activities. Some fields, however, will not allow of too much artificial cultivation. Art is like a flower—if its growth is forced, it becomes delicate, and consequently short-lived.

We are to-day seeking to force the growth of American music. The American composer and his public are suffering from an acute case of *propaganditis*.

It is so unnecessary. There is undeniably creative musical talent in our country, and there will be still more as time goes on. One may say that the American composer does not receive his due in time, but is that peculiar to the American composer? Did Wagner gain immediate recognition? Was Hugo Wolf's first song hailed as a masterpiece? Remember that friends of this great song writer financed the publication of his songs.

Too much ill-advised, though well-intentioned propaganda may make the word *American*, when applied to music, a millstone about its neck. A few years ago a man would have been apt to stifle a yawn when told that he was to hear an American composition. To-day he may stifle a yawn because he is so surfeited with hearing of his duty to native composers. It is far easier to combat snobbishness than *ennui*.

Ill-directed efforts to obtain recognition for our composers have classed mediocrity with genius. Both are American, therefore we must admire them equally. I contend that it is not a sign of patriotism to applaud the mediocrities of contemporary composers; by so doing we injure our real genius. It is because the American public has had inferior music forced upon it, that it gives polite, perfunctory applause to the native masterpieces it hears. With genius, of course, we can fairly class that high degree of talent which occasionally, in its lifetime of production, gives birth to a great and much loved work. Such talent deserves its opportunity.

Concert-givers often include American works on their programs from a sense of duty. With so many native compositions

available, that duty has not been difficult to discharge, but those responsible for the programs are not always as careful as they should be in their choice of pieces.

I recall a recent conversation between a noted music critic and an eminent conductor. The critic remarked that attending concerts in the unseasonably warm weather had exhausted him.

"Ah, but in addition to the hot weather," the conductor replied, "I am rehearsing an American program."

This remark was made in jest, no doubt, but it reflects an attitude. Conductors, pianists, singers and violinists expect praise for their patriotism in including American works on their programs. Why should they be praised? If American compositions are worthy of a place on programs the artists reap the benefit of having found good concert-numbers; if the American works are not worthy of a hearing, those who play them should be pulled from their platforms for the injury they are doing American music, and for lowering their own artistic standards.

Praise, indeed! Is it not a privilege to have good music to play? Is it a duty to play mediocre music? Why use the word *American* at all? Music is music—good, bad or indifferent. Coddling mediocrity, and placing it in the same boat with genius, will not help genius.

There have been many of these All-American programs presented within the past few years. Their object is evident, and their intent worthy. Those who give the concerts aim to insure our composers a sympathetic hearing. It is said that Edward MacDowell did not wish his works played on a program exclusively devoted to American compositions. He felt that unless his music could bear comparison with other numbers of a program it had better not be played at all.

It is not the All-American program (how it sounds like a foot-ball team!) that will make for the advancement of native musical art. The object of these affairs is *too* obvious. Far better for the concert-makers regularly to include one American work on each program, without a label, for then will the public find for itself that the work is good. When a man has the pleasure of making his own discoveries, without being told what he must like, his liking will last longer and he will ask for more.

The point may be made that the more hearings the American composer is given, the more he will be encouraged to write: that even though a deluge of mediocrity results, there will be a certain percentage of genius. I doubt it. In a recent issue of *THE MUSICAL QUARTERLY*, A. Walter Kramer expresses the opinion

that we are writing too much music in America to-day. He points out that with the prolific comes the mediocre, hand in hand. I think Mr. Kramer is right. If the vast amount of music brought forward each year were an indication of quality, our fears for the future of American composition would be groundless. Let the composers write and write, and then write still more, but let them save the bulk of their work for their own portfolios. Far better to be known to the world for five masterpieces than for a thousand mediocrities.

The average song-recitalist is a serious offender. In many cases he or she starts with a group of songs from the old masters—early Italian or old English. On second appearance she or he sings a group of *lieder*, and the third part of the program is devoted to songs from the French school. Then appears the final set—the American group. If this fits in logically with the scheme of things (a modern group for final appearance), very well, because then there is an artistic justification. If the list is chosen to represent the song-literature of various nations, that is again a valid reason, and since America is the youngest nation, and its musical product the most recent, its songs would chronologically belong at the end of the program.

But how often does the singer put these songs at the end because he or she feels that they must be gotten in somewhere, and because the singer knows that the publishers will advertise the fact that she or he sings their songs? The critics have departed, and all the audience except the invited guests (who at the *début*, we admit, form the bulk of the listeners), has gone home; but our recitalist has done her duty—she has sung at least six American songs. Under such conditions I wonder how far the cause of American music has been advanced!

A composer recently selected four of his songs, and sent copies to a list of twenty singers, with a note asking that they examine his compositions. He said that he would be very much pleased if the artists found them suitable for use on programs. He received one reply.

"Very well," he thought, "they do not like my songs. I cannot expect that they will sing them."

A few weeks later this composer sent the same songs to four other singers, and suggested that if they liked the songs, and could use them in concert, the recitalists send their photographs for use in a circular the publisher was planning to devote to concert-artists who programmed the compositions. Within a week's time the composer received four photographs, four letters

of commendation, and four assurances that the songs would be used in public. I wonder if Edward MacDowell ever promised advertising to singers who sang *Thy Beaming Eyes* or *The Sea*.

We must give the American composer every chance. It is our duty not only to him but to ourselves. There are worthy American compositions, and more are being brought forward every year. Play them, sing them, but do not label them. If American music is given a fair hearing, unaccompanied by undignified, blatant trumpeting, it will be sympathetically received, and get the appreciation it deserves.

We are a little too self-conscious about our art in this country. In music we think too much about an individual "school" of expression. We cannot by taking thought add a national individuality to our artistic stature. Such things must come from within us; we cannot order an idiom as we would a suit of clothes. In our early days we imitated the German composers, and we found them good models. When the War came, with its reaction against all things Teutonic, our composers turned to the French for patterns, and now we have an army of Debussyites. This is inevitable, for the real American school will appear only in the due course of years. Our literature already shows marked individuality; the American novel, the American short story, the American drama are facts. They developed unconsciously, and we shall have an American music also if we stop thinking about it.

In this connection it is interesting to read what a Frenchman, Pierre Lasserre, says about French individuality, coming as it does from a nation whose characteristics of musical expression are easily distinguished. In the preface of his recent book, *The Spirit of French Music* (Dutton), the author addresses his countrymen as follows:

It is right to be French in everything: but one must not be so of set purpose. . . . The French spirit, French taste—these are things that do not define themselves into formulæ. It is not that they lack body and reality; on the contrary, their reality as we see it in history is too much alive, too overflowing—and how should we recognize it in history if we did not feel it stirring within us? There is nothing more real, more distinct, than the physiognomy of an individual, especially if a superior personality shines through his features. But that is a thing that is felt and cannot be defined.

To return to the recitalist. If he will select his programs from the works of all nations, *having examined them all with equal care*, he will choose a fair proportion of American compositions;

not necessarily because they are American, but because they belong to a class of music he needs for his recitals. When American music is performed because it is good music (and it can be performed for such a reason), then will the cause of American music advance itself, in an entirely natural growth. Then will the term *American* cease to be the signal for applauding mediocre music, the patronizing attitude will disappear, and our fellow nations will recognize that our musical output can keep pace with theirs.

The American composer is a problem only as we make a problem of him. He exists and he will continue to exist. Encourage him, but be sure that he does not receive the kind of encouragement that discourages his public.